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Agenda item 11

REVIEW OF FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS IN FIELDS WITH WHICH
THE SUB-COMMISSION HAS BEEN OR MAY BE CONCERNED

Written statement submitted by Fraternité Notre Dame, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[11 August 1997]

GE.97-13329 (E)

I. ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS OF INTOLERANCE AND OF DISCRIMINATION BASED ON RELIGION OR BELIEF

1. We acknowledge the right of expression of religious minorities, the same right to existence and respect as is the case for the four or five main recognized religious groups.

2. Fraternité Notre Dame opened missions of the humanitarian type in different countries and was able to observe that churches were intervening with Governments to keep their privileges and arrange so that minorities were not heard. We observed frequently attitudes of discrimination, for example in certain African countries where the installation of bishops and priests from the country of origin would not be favoured. This attitude does not allow the development and flourishing of the expression of the Faith and maintains a form of moral guardianship instead of fostering the cultural identity of the country.

3. Fraternité Notre Dame was, however, able to appreciate an openness of mind and a greater respect for the religious in other countries like the United States of America. There is no reason why religious minorities should not be accepted, as long as they do not represent a danger for the country or infringe on the freedom of individuals. One can find weaknesses in the great religious groups, but while these weaknesses are easily tolerated in those major religious groups, they are not tolerated in minorities. It is a serious thing to prevent the free expression of a religious group.

4. Certain Catholics have decided to close their minds and practise sectarianism towards other forms of belief or towards any expression different from theirs, even going so far as applying pressure and committing religious persecution, which is unworthy of Christian brothers. One's acceptance should not depend on the numerical strength of one's religion or belief; everyone may have a different way of thinking and should be free to express it.

II. THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN DEVELOPMENT

5. A place of dignity must be restored to women in which they may blossom, more in terms of responsibilities than equality of forces.

The place of women in the family

6. In the family, she contributes to the proper physical, moral and spiritual growth of the child and has a right to ensure the education of her children. The social environment should again value and support her role as an educator within the family, which is the primary unit of society.

7. To be the mother of a family should be considered and re-emphasized as being a full job, just like any other profession. The presence and availability of the mother give structure to the physical and psychological development of the child. People need to be sensitized to the legitimacy of this free choice of woman. One can observe that for countries in the southern hemisphere the role of families has been maintained and constitutes the basis of society.

8. Respect of the elderly is practised. They are experienced keepers of the group's values.

9. In its missions Fraternité Notre Dame has also noted that women do not always have the right to express their opinions, notably in the area of health, in which an intermediary comes between them and the medical authorities.

Role of the woman dedicated to the religious life within religious groups

10. In some churches, women do not have a recognized role. The history of churches relates many manifestations of anti-female behaviour. Even though women dedicated to the religious life do not substitute for men, they should have as many responsibilities as men in the various fields of their abilities. The nun is not honoured. A great deal of her responsibilities have been delegated to lay people who do not always have the necessary abilities and availability because of their family and job constraints. The religious vocation as a free commitment should be a free life-choice, just like any other profession. You can only choose what you know; in order to be appreciated, this life-choice should be better known. One often observes ignorance about the nature and responsibilities of the nun devoted to the service of others; her image is often false and erroneous.

11. In its experience, Fraternité Notre Dame has seen that the active and benevolent presence and collaboration of the dedicated religious person is a driving force for humanitarian, social and economic development, fostering human dignity and societal stability.

III. THE RIGHT TO LIFE

12. Every man has a right to live as he likes, which implies the right not to die of starvation, to be fed and to be housed. These basic rights are often denied both in industrialized and in developing countries.

13. The problems of poverty and destitution would soon be resolved if Governments, firms and organizations would only accept to give a very small percentage of their incomes or goods.

14. Why are there so many conflicts throughout the world? Not because human beings are dying from starvation. By solving the problems of hunger, the accumulation of hatred, retaliation, revolt, revolution and war could be avoided.

Prominent role of NGOs

15. We have evidence that NGOs working in the field with the people have a critical role and serve as a channel between the rich and the poor, that is to say between populations which are economically and socially integrated and populations suffering from destitution and need. They are the link which brings work, comfort, health care, education and food, restoring hope and human dignity.

IV. HUMAN RIGHTS OF DETAINEES

16. Assisting those who are detained is a right and a duty. While every detained person is responsible for his/her past actions, he/she nevertheless has a right to be treated as a human being. He/she must be able to express what he/she went through. Armed with their experiences as visitors to penitentiaries for both adults and children in various countries, members of Fraternité Notre Dame have often deplored the varied forms of moral, physical and psychological pressure which are applied against detainees, in violation of their human rights.

V. THE RIGHT TO HAVE ACCESS TO KNOWLEDGE AND CULTURE

17. Fraternité Notre Dame often saw that access to knowledge, books and literacy was ridiculed. For instance, in Haiti, literacy programmes have been prevented by church officials, who are supposed to be the ones to carry them out. Charging money to teach destitute children, a common practice in developing countries, is a violation of the right to education. Other forms of exclusion from school are to be seen in developed countries. For example, children from families with financial problems who cannot afford to pay for food in school cafeterias may also be denied the right to education.

VI. RIGHT TO WORK FOR ADULTS AND THE ELDERLY

18. In certain countries, there is notable discrimination as regards the age of those who apply for a job. Some retired people can feel rejuvenated and become morally richer if they continue to lead an active life. However, this right is not authorized or encouraged everywhere.

VII. RIGHT TO HAVE A CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC IDENTITY

19. Every cultural and ethnic group has a right to keep and transmit its own values and beliefs which characterize its identity. Fraternité Notre Dame has suffered from this discrimination because of its attachment and faithfulness to its particular religious beliefs. Unity does not mean uniformity, but respect of diversity.

20. On the eve of the twenty-first century, it is regrettable that, as proven by certain investigations, there are so many manifestations of intolerance and persecution against Christians and other religious minorities throughout the world.